

COLD CASE; WHAT HAPPENED TO OREGON TEEN?

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Body

CONTENT: FREEMAN, COURTRIGHT, MURDER, MCGUFFIN, VIDOCQ SOCIETY

GRAPHICS: 20/20

CHRIS CUOMO (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) Good evening and welcome to the second hour of "20/20." It's something almost every parent worries about, certainly I do, the day their daughter brings home her first boyfriend. What kind of boy is he? Is she safe with him? Tonight, the story of a 15-year-old who wasn't safe, but was her boyfriend to blame?

ELIZABETH VARGAS (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) For the past 10 years, her family has struggled with the mystery of what happened to her. And now they're about to get some answers as police call in a secret society of experts, crime solvers from around the world who focus their skills on cold cases. Jim Avila follows their leads.

MARK DANNELS (CHIEF OF COQUILLE POLICE DEPARTMENT)

I don't know if he's carrying a gun. We assume he is and we're taking him down today.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) It's the biggest day in southwest Oregon law enforcement in 10 years.

MARK DANNELS (CHIEF OF COQUILLE POLICE DEPARTMENT)

Our goal, first thing, is to take him into custody without any incidents. Everybody's safe. Nobody gets hurt.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) The Coquille, Oregon Police Department believes it has finally cracked a decade-long mystery, a cold case many in this lumber and fishing town of 4,000 feared would never be solved.

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MARK DANNELS (CHIEF OF COQUILLE POLICE DEPARTMENT)

I'm very excited, very excited.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) But here it is, a suspect in their sights, an arrest made just days ago. And "20/20" is allowed inside the reopened investigation from start to finish.

MARK DANNELS (CHIEF OF COQUILLE POLICE DEPARTMENT)

"20/20" will be present and they'll be in with us.

POLICE OFFICER (MALE)

He's walking down the driveway right now.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) It's a rare behind-the-scenes ride-along in the hunt for clues in the disappearance of 15-year-old Leah Freeman.

MARK DANNELS (CHIEF OF COQUILLE POLICE DEPARTMENT)

He's in custody.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) She was just a high school freshman. Scrapbooks show her looking radiant back in the summer of 2000. A scrappy, little spitfire of a girl, point guard on the basketball team, with a wit as quick as her rapid-fire jump shot.

STACIE CRUTCHFIELD (LEAH'S FRIEND)

She was just goofy, always trying to make people laugh. She always kind of went the extra, extra little mile to try to make you smile.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) And her friend Stacie Crutchfield says what was making Leah smile the summer of her disappearance was her handsome prom date, Nick McGuffin, an 18-year-old graduating senior.

STACIE CRUTCHFIELD (LEAH'S FRIEND)

They had a pretty serious relationship pretty quickly, and they spent a lot of time together. I know that Leah really cared about him a great deal.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) Some, including best friend Cherie Mitchell, thought Leah was too young for a romance with a much older teen in a hurry.

CHERIE MITCHELL (LEAH'S BEST FRIEND)

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I don't think that she'd really had, like, a serious boyfriend at all before him. And so, I'm sure that he just made her feel special. He was definitely a flirt. I think that he was kind of dangerous. Maybe she liked the danger side of him.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) And of course, says Leah's mother Cory Courtright, there was his age, an 18-year-old boy anxious to explore, matched with a girl too young to have sex.

CORY COURTRIGHT (LEAH'S MOTHER)

Found out that they were being sexually active. And that was disturbing for me. She wanted him to be her boyfriend and I didn't.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) Turns out her best friend Cherie wanted them apart, too. Leah confides in a letter to her that she was worried about the tumultuous nature of their budding romance.

READER (FEMALE)

(Reading) "I just didn't feel like being around him anymore tonight, I love him to death, but that boy gets an attitude sometimes."

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) On the night of Leah's disappearance, Cherie demands she break up with Nick. That idea did not go over well with Leah, who stormed out of Cherie's house into the warm summer evening.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) And so, when she left, what was her mood at that point, do you think?

CHERIE MITCHELL (LEAH'S BEST FRIEND)

Oh, she was pissed. She, I remember her saying to me, "I'm sorry, I'm not good enough for you."

CORY COURTRIGHT (LEAH'S MOTHER)

She left Cherie's and she walked down Fourth Street and turned left on Central Boulevard. She was seen walking by McKay's Market.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) She would never make it home. Leah is last seen alone near a gas station in downtown Coquille. Among those looking for her that night is her concerned boyfriend, Nick McGuffin.

CHERIE MITCHELL (LEAH'S BEST FRIEND)

He came at 9:00 and asked if she was there. And, you know, I said no. You know, we got in a fight, she left. She's, you know, mad. I had him call her mom.

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JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) An hour later, Nick did call Leah's mom asking if she was there, promising to go find her.

CORY COURTRIGHT (LEAH'S MOTHER)

I said okay. Hung the phone back up, fell back asleep, and I didn't wake up until 3:30. I got up to go to the bathroom, and I looked in her room and her bed was empty. My first thought was that she must be with Nick. Where else could she be?

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) At first light, Cory calls Nick again. He goes, "She didn't come home last night?" And I said, "No, where is she?" He goes, "I don't know."

STACIE CRUTCHFIELD (LEAH'S FRIEND)

Immediately, people started putting out fliers. They started putting out ribbon.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) The police assumed Leah is just a troubled teen who had run away for a few days to figure things out. It was an assumption that until this day many criticize as the reason the search for Leah went so cold. Kathy Erickson was editor of the county's largest daily paper.

KATHY ERICKSON (NEWSPAPER EDITOR)

I think the Coquille Police Department simply was lacking in motivation at that point.

CORY COURTRIGHT (LEAH'S MOTHER)

I'll be honest with you, I didn't get along with the first chief of police that we had here. He simply wouldn't answer me. He was mean and rude to me. He proceeded to stick his finger in my face and scream at me.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) The mother of a murder victim?

CORY COURTRIGHT (LEAH'S MOTHER)

Yes, he did. Yes, he did.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) Can we talk to you for a second?

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) The former coquille chief denied several requests by "20/20" for an interview.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

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(Off-camera) I just thought it was fair that we come and try to ask you a couple of important questions that are...

MIKE REAVES (FORMER CHIEF OF COQUILLE POLICE DEPARTMENT)

I'm not gonna answer any questions.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) Can you tell me why you considered it a...

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) Chief Mike Reaves later returned to tell me he denies being rude or any lack of motivation. But he agrees it was not until five days after Leah disappeared that he was convinced of foul play. What changed his mind? Shocking evidence that could not be ignored. A blood spattered gym shoe is turned in to police. And then two days after that, a few miles away, a second matching shoe. A month later, a gruesome discovery. The police officer is sent to find Leah's mother.

CORY COURTRIGHT (LEAH'S MOTHER)

He said, "Cory, I need to take you home." I said, "They found her." He goes, he told me he didn't know. He said, "All I know is I got a call from dispatch and I need to take you home."

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) But you knew?

CORY COURTRIGHT (LEAH'S MOTHER)

Yeah. Yeah. I knew, but I still let denial take over. I didn't want to go home. I didn't want to hear the final news. I didn't want to hear it. Got home and the preacher's car was in front of the house. Devastated.

PAUL FRASIER (COOS COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY)

The body of a teenage female, tentatively identified as Leah Freeman, was discovered in the Fairview area.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) With Leah's body found, the case is now reclassified as homicide. And from the start, boyfriend Nick McGuffin is brought in to help.

GRAPHICS: TRANSCRIPT OF AUDIO RECORDING

MIKE REAVES (FORMER CHIEF OF COQUILLE POLICE DEPARTMENT)

You know what this is about, right? Missing person case?

NICK MCGUFFIN (SUSPECT)

Like, oh, yeah.

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MIKE REAVES (FORMER CHIEF OF COQUILLE POLICE DEPARTMENT)

And you know the victim in this case, Leah? How do you know her?

NICK MCGUFFIN (SUSPECT)

She's my girlfriend.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) When we return, after 10 years of bickering, Coquille gets a new chief.

MARK DANNELS (CHIEF OF COQUILLE POLICE DEPARTMENT)

You're holding back that piece of information.

KRISTEN STEINHOFF (NICK'S FRIEND)

No, I'm not.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

Who asks tough new questions and enlists the help of a trio of nationally known crime avengers...

RICHARD WALTERS (FORENSIC PSYCHOLOGIST)

This particular type of offender likes to come in like this.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) ...who breathe new life into a dying case.

COMMERCIAL BREAK

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) Little Coquille, Oregon is split apart by the murder of one of its children.

KATHY ERICKSON (NEWSPAPER EDITOR)

There were folks who were sympathetic to the police and thought they were doing their very best. Others were angry about the lack of solving the crime.

REPORTER (FEMALE)

Nearly a decade has gone by since Leah Freeman disappeared and was later found dead.

FRIEND (FEMALE)

This needs to be solved. It needs to end.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

COLD CASE; WHAT HAPPENED TO OREGON TEEN?

(Voiceover) A town embarrassed. A full decade has not been enough time to find out what happened to Leah Freeman before her body was thrown away in the woods outside of town.

POLICE OFFICER (MALE)

It's a case that I think most people feel could have got solved back in 2000. It's a black sheep of Coquille. There's not one person who probably wouldn't want it solved besides maybe the people that were involved in it.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) The case now as cold as the wind that routinely whips the coast here. Never quite closed, but according to his officers, Chief Reaves quietly suspended the investigation. Leah's unsolved murder is such a polarizing event, the town council is confronted by a packed house.

TOWN COUNCIL OFFICER (FEMALE)

We're gonna try to give some much needed community support to Cory Courtright and her family and the search for justice for Leah Freeman.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) The controversy helped topple the police chief. And what's next in the Leah Freeman case is the main question asked of anyone applying for his job.

MARK DANNELS (CHIEF OF COQUILLE POLICE DEPARTMENT)

One of the big topics to all the candidates was, what can we do about this Leah Freeman homicide case?

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) Mark Dannels is given the job, vowing to focus on Leah Freeman's murder.

MARK DANNELS (CHIEF OF COQUILLE POLICE DEPARTMENT)

Cold cases are tough, especially after 10 years like this case has been. There was no files. It was thrown in boxes. We didn't know who had been interviewed, who needed to be interviewed, what evidence do we still have. Some of the evidence was in other department's evidence room. The photos back in those days were a lot of Polaroids. Polaroids degrade after a long time.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) Chief Dannels, a cop from out of town, is brought here for his new eyes and new ideas, and is unafraid to ask for help.

MARK DANNELS (CHIEF OF COQUILLE POLICE DEPARTMENT)

We're a small community with not a lot of resources to pull from.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

COLD CASE; WHAT HAPPENED TO OREGON TEEN?

(Voiceover) So, when he hears about a one-of-a-kind rogues gallery of crime-solving professionals that meets once a month in faraway Philadelphia...

VIDOCQ SOCIETY MEMBER (FEMALE)

I speak four languages.

VIDOCQ SOCIETY MEMBER (MALE)

I was the special agent in charge of US Customs.

VIDOCQ SOCIETY MEMBER (FEMALE)

I'm a ritualistic crimes expert, symbols, rituals, any kind of bizarre mutilations.

MARK DANNELS (CHIEF OF COQUILLE POLICE DEPARTMENT)

In a cold case, I'll take any resource I can to help us solve this case.

RICHARD WALTERS (FORENSIC PSYCHOLOGIST)

We believe she was shot at close range.

MARK DANNELS (CHIEF OF COQUILLE POLICE DEPARTMENT)

We have some of that magnitude offering up services, we're jumping all over it.

VIDOCQ SOCIETY MEMBER (MALE)

When you bring all this expertise together in one room at one time, it's one-stop shopping.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) So Leah's case turns to the men and women of the Vidocq Society, named after Eugene Francois Vidocq, the father of modern criminology, Napoleon's chief detective, practicing police science 100 years before the FBI or Scotland Yard were even formed.

MICHAEL CAPUZZO (AUTHOR)

You have an organization of pro bono crime fighters who believe passionately in good and evil and being on the right side of it.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) Best selling crime writer Michael Capuzzo just finished a book called "The Murder Room" on these volunteer Sherlock Holmes, led by three friends who hate to see a murderer get away.

WILLIAM FLEISHER (CO-FOUNDER OF VIDOCQ SOCIETY)

Case has to be over two years old. And we have to have police cooperation.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

COLD CASE; WHAT HAPPENED TO OREGON TEEN?

(Voiceover) Leah's case fits that profile perfectly. So, Chief Dannels flies to meet the Vidocq Society in person.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) To an overworked, overtaxed community who suffered a terrible tragedy, what do they bring to those folks?

WILLIAM FLEISHER (CO-FOUNDER OF VIDOCQ SOCIETY)

Very simple, hope.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) Bill Fleisher is a former federal agent for the FBI and Customs, specializing in the lie detector. At least four polygraphs were given in Leah's case. The soul of the group is forensic artist Frank Bender, who learned his craft molding the faces of the long gone cold case suspects at the county morgue, sculpting the dead.

FRANK BENDER (FORENSIC ARTIST)

A friend of mine worked at Philadelphia Medical Examiner's Office and he said, "Frank, watch the autopsies there, you can learn something about anatomy." I said, "Good idea."

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) Then there is the dark side of the trio, the thin man, Richard Walter, piano playing, chain smoking, psychological profiler who spent years as a prison psychologist collecting first hand the creepy, inside details of murder from the killers themselves.

MICHAEL CAPUZZO (AUTHOR)

His nickname at Scotland Yard is the Little Sherlock Holmes because he sort of looks, talks, acts like Sherlock Holmes, but he's the real deal. He's a criminologist. He's devoted his life to it.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) Richard Walter would become the point man in Leah's case. Back in Oregon, Police Chief Dannels is impressed with the Vidocq Society track record of solving the unsolvable.

MARK DANNELS (CHIEF OF COQUILLE POLICE DEPARTMENT)

I've been in law enforcement 26 years, but sitting in the room that day with these experts, I felt like it was my first day on the job.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) They told him about the dozens of cold cases they helped solve, including the one at Phillies Drexel University in November of 1984.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

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(Off-camera) All right, let's talk about the foot fetish case.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) Student Deborah Wilson was found strangled in a stairwell outside a computer lab. No sign of rape. Her purse was not taken. But just as in Leah's case, her shoes were not on her feet. For eight years, Philadelphia police were stumped.

MICHAEL CAPUZZO (AUTHOR)

A great detective can help some hard working and excellent cops possibly get to the truth.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) And in this case, like Leah's in Oregon, shoes would be key evidence or the lack of it. The thin man puffed on his cigarette, dug deep into his chamber of horrors and focused on Deborah Wilson's bare feet. Find a man with a history of stealing women's footwear.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) What kind of killer was this person?

RICHARD WALTERS (FORENSIC PSYCHOLOGIST)

They use fetishes and they use fantasy. He thinks about shoes and feet and socks.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) Following the modern day Sherlock's suggestions, detectives find a serious red flag, a former military man now working as a campus security guard had been court-martialed and discharged for stealing women's sneakers. And sure enough, he has a collection of shoes.

WILLIAM FLEISHER (CO-FOUNDER OF VIDOCQ SOCIETY)

Sure enough, sure enough.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) Former security guard, David Dickson, Jr. became known as Dr. Scholl. He was arrested and convicted of murder in 1995.

MICHAEL CAPUZZO (AUTHOR)

People think of them as wizards who sort of peep and mutter and go into a backroom and come out and say he did it.

RICHARD WALTERS (FORENSIC PSYCHOLOGIST)

It's sweet revenge. And I gain great personal satisfaction in hearing handcuffs click.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

COLD CASE; WHAT HAPPENED TO OREGON TEEN?

(Voiceover) A vagabond group of crime fighters now giving hope, leads and confidence to the recharged investigation into Leah Freeman's murder.

MARK DANNELS (CHIEF OF COQUILLE POLICE DEPARTMENT)

Her shoe was found by the road here with blood on it.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) That night.

MARK DANNELS (CHIEF OF COQUILLE POLICE DEPARTMENT)

That night.

RICHARD WALTERS (FORENSIC PSYCHOLOGIST)

I would suggest to you that she was forcibly taken from that point. She got probably smashed in the face.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) The Vidocq Society sends its Sherlock Holmes to Oregon.

MICHAEL CAPUZZO (AUTHOR)

He can see into the heart of darkness.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) When we come back, when will the people of Oregon hear handcuffs click? Stay with us.

COMMERCIAL BREAK

CORY COURTRIGHT (LEAH'S MOTHER)

My favorite picture of Leah. It's kind of hard to spread it out.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) A mother's treasured memories...

CORY COURTRIGHT (LEAH'S MOTHER)

She got the MVP award.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) ...of a daughter lost.

CORY COURTRIGHT (LEAH'S MOTHER)

Nice and big, so when I wake up I can see her.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

COLD CASE; WHAT HAPPENED TO OREGON TEEN?

(Voiceover) Leah Freeman's belongings have been kept safe in her room for a decade now. Her mother Cory's anguish heightened by the knowledge that whoever took Leah's life is still free. In fact, a lot of people in this tight knit rural community of Coos Bay, Oregon believe that the murderer is still living among them, confident that he will never be caught.

POLICE OFFICER (MALE)

Hey, chief, we're sitting on Nick's car over here at the mill.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) After a decade of suspicion, Coquille Police, at the direction of the Vidocq Society, are going after Nick McGuffin, turning up the heat on the boyfriend, now the one and only suspect.

POLICE OFFICER (MALE)

He's our prime suspect and I think he probably killed a 15-year-old girl. In my opinion, he needs to be poked at a little bit.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) Using marked cars to watch him in the open.

SEAN SANBORN (COQUILLE POLICE DEPARTMENT)

I want him to see me, you know? I want him to know that we are watching him and we are watching what he's doing.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) And he does. That's Nick there waving to Coquille Police Officer Sean Sanborn as he leaves his job as a short order cook at the local casino.

SEAN SANBORN (COQUILLE POLICE DEPARTMENT)

I don't think he was surprised to see us. And that's kind of the goal.

MARK DANNELS (CHIEF OF COQUILLE POLICE DEPARTMENT)

Good morning, everyone.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) Chief Dannels is advised to take the case public, and he does, holding a news conference to announce Leah's murder is no longer a dormant case.

MARK DANNELS (CHIEF OF COQUILLE POLICE DEPARTMENT)

We've interviewed over a hundred, almost 200 people in the last six months.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

COLD CASE; WHAT HAPPENED TO OREGON TEEN?

(Voiceover) Besides the 35 investigators from all over Southwest Oregon, Chief Dannels enlists Richard Walter from the Vidocq Society to consult on the big picture.

MARK DANNELS (CHIEF OF COQUILLE POLICE DEPARTMENT)

That night, the night she went missing, her shoe was found by the road here with blood on it.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) So, we don't really know exactly where she was killed. But you do know that she was last seen alive on the corner down the street here and that there's evidence that some kind of harm had happened to her by the time she got 100 yards away.

MARK DANNELS (CHIEF OF COQUILLE POLICE DEPARTMENT)

Exactly.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) So, Richard, what does all this tell you?

RICHARD WALTERS (FORENSIC PSYCHOLOGIST)

I would suggest to you that she was forcibly taken from that point. She got probably smashed in the face. This particular type of offender likes to come in like this real quick.

REPORTER (FEMALE)

15-year-old Leah Freeman vanished off the streets of Coquille five weeks ago. Her death is being treated as a homicide. But investigators are saying little else.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) It took five weeks of searching to find Leah's decaying body on the side of an isolated lumber road five miles outside of town.

PAUL FRASIER (COOS COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY)

At approximately 3:30 this afternoon, Leah Freeman was discovered.

MARK DANNELS (CHIEF OF COQUILLE POLICE DEPARTMENT)

It appeared like they rolled her down the hill. It wasn't like she was placed on there. She was thrown and gone.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) They didn't try to bury her?

MARK DANNELS (CHIEF OF COQUILLE POLICE DEPARTMENT)

No burying, nothing to conceal her.

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RICHARD WALTERS (FORENSIC PSYCHOLOGIST)

There are certain types of killers that would dump exactly in this fashion. Part of the pathology is it doesn't count unless somebody knows. And so they hope that eventually she's gonna be found, but they want to distance themselves in the meantime. They don't want to be arrested for it. They don't mind being considered a suspect for it, because that's kind of machismo.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) Richard Walters, a forensic psychologist by trade, gives police confidence they're zeroing in on the right man. Richard labels Leah's murderer a power assertive crime type, and narrows down the kind of person who would kill a 15-year-old girl.

RICHARD WALTERS (FORENSIC PSYCHOLOGIST)

Power assertive is that muscle flexing, tectonic kind of braggart, who thinks he's John Wayne, who wants to be a bigger man than what he is.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) Walter says the crime scene and dumping of the body tells him Leah was not tortured, not sexually assaulted. She was just in the way somehow.

RICHARD WALTERS (FORENSIC PSYCHOLOGIST)

The end goal was to get her dead and to get her dead in the most efficient way.

POLICE OFFICER (MALE)

He calls her a bitch.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) A profile that resonates with the local crew and resembles their main suspect, boyfriend Nick McGuffin, a young man who friends say has a temper, been in trouble with the law, scrapes with subsequent girlfriends. But now, the investigative team must go beyond profiling and educated conjecture to find real evidence a jury can use to convict.

PAUL FRASIER (COOS COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY)

Remember this, to get a murder conviction, I'm gonna need a unanimous verdict. It only takes one person.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) The team starts with Nick's story, that interview where he lays out where he was and what he was doing the night of the murder.

NICK MCGUFFIN (SUSPECT)

I was with her until 7:00 that night.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

COLD CASE; WHAT HAPPENED TO OREGON TEEN?

(Voiceover) Nick says he comes back to Cherie's house at 9:00, but Leah has already left.

NICK MCGUFFIN (SUSPECT)

Cherie said that they got in an argument. She was bawling. And that she just left and I could probably catch her if I went and looked for her.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) Nick tells police he's driving a '67 Mustang looking for Leah all over town.

NICK MCGUFFIN (SUSPECT)

I basically drove everywhere for that four hours looking for her, and I didn't see her once.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) Is that right?

MARK DANNELS (CHIEF OF COQUILLE POLICE DEPARTMENT)

No. We have several witnesses that actually placed Nick with Leah after 9:00. If he's claiming he wasn't with her after 9:00, but we can show he was with her, what's he hiding? Why would he say he's not with her when we know he was?

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) Yeah, why would he lie about it?

MARK DANNELS (CHIEF OF COQUILLE POLICE DEPARTMENT)

Exactly.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) Others who saw Nick that night say he was acting strangely. He came back to Leah's best friend Cherie's house in a panic, even though Leah had been missing for only 45 minutes.

CHERIE MITCHELL (LEAH'S BEST FRIEND)

He was definitely, you know, jumpy, talking fast. When he left, me and my mom said that was weird. You know, he's very jumpy. Like, why is he so concerned? It was definitely odd.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) One of Nick's friends who was with him late that night told detectives in this recorded interview that Nick had already concluded he would never see Leah again.

NICK'S FRIEND (FEMALE)

He was acting weird, like she was never coming back. He acted like there was never gonna be a tomorrow.

COLD CASE; WHAT HAPPENED TO OREGON TEEN?

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) During his police interview, Nick, just the day after she's reported missing, seems convinced the worst has happened to Leah.

NICK MCGUFFIN (SUSPECT)

She would have called somebody by now. She'd at least contacted me if she - would have ran away.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) And Nick's own statements after Leah's disappearance may point back right at him. Among other things, Nick switches to the past tense when talking about Leah at a time when only the killer should know if she's dead or alive.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) When you look at the statement in general, what do you see?

MARK MCLISH (HANDWRITING EXPERT)

A lot of deception. He's withholding some information.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) At the Vidocq Society's suggestion, McGuffin's writing is reviewed by Mark Mclish, an expert in statement analysis, a technique used by police, but like polygraphs, not widely accepted in court to find inconsistencies in a suspect's story.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) What indication is this boyfriend giving us that he knows Leah is already dead?

MARK MCLISH (HANDWRITING EXPERT)

He tells us that Cherie was like her best friend. And the question is, how does he know that Cherie and Leah are no longer best friends? The answer is because he knows at this point in time Leah is dead.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) And in the background, Richard Walter is rooting the investigators on, closing the net, he says, in a case with little physical evidence pointing to the killer.

RICHARD WALTERS (FORENSIC PSYCHOLOGIST)

You wanna rule out, rule out, rule out. Eventually, then, your bad guy, you're not gonna be able to rule him out, okay? So there he stands with his hand up that he really has no answer for where he was, what he was doing.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

COLD CASE; WHAT HAPPENED TO OREGON TEEN?

(Voiceover) Is Nick's hand up? We tried to ask McGuffin about Leah and the evidence against him. But he only wanted to talk about himself as a victim of police harassment, 10 years under the spotlight.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) You don't wanna talk to me about it? I just wanna ask you about how it's been? That's all I want to ask you about. Has it been difficult?

NICK MCGUFFIN (SUSPECT)

How do you think it's been?

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) I don't know. I mean, - know you've been under scrutiny.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) When we come back, police retest key evidence for DNA, Nick's car, 10-year-old underwear, and a promising new discovery, detectives travel hundreds of miles away to track a car Nick never mentioned.

CAR OWNER (FEMALE)

They told me that supposedly my car had been involved in a murder.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) Will new DNA testing close the loop? Stay with us.

COMMERCIAL BREAK

ANNOUNCER

A possible break in an ice-cold murder case.

MARK DANNELS (CHIEF OF COQUILLE POLICE DEPARTMENT)

They found what they consider human blood in the car.

ANNOUNCER

And a girl who's been keeping a secret.

MARK DANNELS (CHIEF OF COQUILLE POLICE DEPARTMENT)

You're holding back that piece of information.

KRISTEN STEINHOFF (NICK'S FRIEND)

No, I'm not.

ANNOUNCER

COLD CASE; WHAT HAPPENED TO OREGON TEEN?

Ten years later, will there finally be justice for Leah?

CORY COURTRIGHT (LEAH'S MOTHER)

Whoever did this needs to pay.

ANNOUNCER

When "20/20" continues after this from our ABC stations.

COMMERCIAL BREAK

MARK DANNELS (CHIEF OF COQUILLE POLICE DEPARTMENT)

We've had 35 law enforcement officers working this case. We've interviewed almost 200 people, 5500 pages have been submitted. We reexamined over 100 items of evidence.

POLICE OFFICER (MALE)

It was some blood evidence.

POLICE OFFICER (MALE)

Evidence.

POLICE OFFICER (MALE) (CONTINUED)

Evidence.

MARK DANNELS (CHIEF OF COQUILLE POLICE DEPARTMENT)

And we're very pleased where we're at with this case.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) The tiny Coquille, Oregon Police Department has reserved a special space for their most important case.

POLICE OFFICER (MALE)

This is our Leah room.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) Filled with charts tracking the main characters.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) This is her boyfriend.

POLICE OFFICER (MALE)

Nick McGuffin.

COLD CASE; WHAT HAPPENED TO OREGON TEEN?

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) His family is all here.

POLICE OFFICER (MALE)

We have Leah Freeman's shoes here, Leah's undergarment. We also have a tank top, which she was wearing at the time of her disappearance.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) Among the Vidocq Society's suggestions to recharge the long dormant case is to take some of the old evidence and retest it for DNA.

POLICE OFFICER (MALE)

And they're going to be reviewing this for any evidence that may have been missed.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) Detectives find Nick's old mustang, which was unsuccessfully searched and sprayed with Luminol to test for the presence of blood during the initial investigation, but not until three weeks after Leah disappeared. Plenty of time to dispose of any evidence, says the chief.

MARK DANNELS (CHIEF OF COQUILLE POLICE DEPARTMENT)

There was nothing in there, it was cleaned and wiped. There was just nothing there.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) Chief Dannels has the crime lab look again, dismantling the trunk.

MARK DANNELS (CHIEF OF COQUILLE POLICE DEPARTMENT)

We have suspicion that might have been where Leah went after her death. Maybe some blood seeped into the bolt areas and areas of cracks and corners.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) And in what appears to be a huge break in the case, police find out that Nick was riding in a second car the night of the murder. Around midnight, he stops at another girl's house, a girl named Kristen Steinhoff, who will become a key if reluctant witness in the case.

MARK DANNELS (CHIEF OF COQUILLE POLICE DEPARTMENT)

Nick's in there saying, help me. I need help. (Inaudible) they jump in Kristen's car, which is a borrowed car.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) That car, a Kia, was never searched a decade ago. And now, it's on the other side of the state. So detectives Chris Webley and Ray McNeely are sent to buy it from the new owner and bring it back.

COLD CASE; WHAT HAPPENED TO OREGON TEEN?

CAR OWNER (FEMALE)

Okay, it's all yours.

CAR OWNER (FEMALE)

They told me that supposedly my car had been involved in a murder back in 2000.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) Oddly enough, this car, too, had been thoroughly cleaned. Air fresheners placed in the passenger compartment and the trunk before it was returned by Kristen and Nick in the early morning hours after Leah's murder. Surprisingly, the fresheners are still there 10 years later.

POLICE OFFICER (MALE)

The suspect had cleaned it beyond anything you would have expected, put air fresheners in it.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) But besides an air freshener, the detectives spot what they hope is a smoking gun, finally, perhaps hard evidence that can be analyzed by the crime lab.

MARK DANNELS (CHIEF OF COQUILLE POLICE DEPARTMENT)

They found what they considered human blood in the car. And that evidence was sent to the Portland DNA crime lab.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) And while that's going on, the reluctant Kristen Steinhoff, yes, that's her 10 years later, is called in by the chief for more questioning and a lie detector test. At the station, Kristen does not do well, denying any direct knowledge of Leah's murder.

KRISTEN STEINHOFF (NICK'S FRIEND)

I don't know how she died. He didn't tell me anything. I didn't even know who the hell she was.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) Kristen Steinhoff fails the polygraph, inadmissible in court but valuable to police who use it as a tool to try and pry more information from her.

KRISTEN STEINHOFF (NICK'S FRIEND)

I don't understand why I failed. I don't know anything. I'm telling the truth and I don't understand why I failed all those questions.

MARK DANNELS (CHIEF OF COQUILLE POLICE DEPARTMENT)

You're holding back that piece of information.

KRISTEN STEINHOFF (NICK'S FRIEND)

COLD CASE; WHAT HAPPENED TO OREGON TEEN?

No, I'm not. If I (censored by network) knew, I would have said something by now. I'm not the kind of person that could hold that in. I would not be able to live with myself.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) But Kristen had already revealed damaging information about that night in an audio interview back in 2002. While Nick and Kristen were supposedly looking all night for Leah, they were actually doing drugs and fooling around.

KRISTEN STEINHOFF (NICK'S FRIEND)

He just tried to kiss me.

POLICE OFFICER (MALE)

Did this happen in your bedroom?

KRISTEN STEINHOFF (NICK'S FRIEND)

Yes, and he leaned over me. I didn't really kiss him back. I put my lips on his.

POLICE OFFICER (MALE)

This guy tries to put a move on you.

KRISTEN STEINHOFF (NICK'S FRIEND)

He tried to have sex with me, and then I told him he had to stop.

MARK DANNELS (CHIEF OF COQUILLE POLICE DEPARTMENT)

They do meth that night. Nick tries to make a move on her to the point of fondling her breasts, kissing on her, his pants are off where she sees his penis. I mean, here's a guy that's worried about his girlfriend. He's frantic about it. She's missing, oh my, but he's making a move on this girl.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) Finally, it's getting so interesting, the prosecutor Paul Frasier joins the questioning just in time to hear Steinhoff say while she doesn't have direct knowledge of what happened to Leah, she did get the feeling Nick was involved.

KRISTEN STEINHOFF (NICK'S FRIEND)

He didn't tell me that he had anything to do with it. It was the way he was acting that made me think that he did.

MARK DANNELS (CHIEF OF COQUILLE POLICE DEPARTMENT)

He creeped her out that night. He was acting so weird. He changed clothes that night from the time she saw him at 9:00 until she him at 12:30 in the morning, he had changed clothes.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

COLD CASE; WHAT HAPPENED TO OREGON TEEN?

(Voiceover) And perhaps most incriminating, according to police, is what Kristen says happened next, claiming Nick threatens to harm her if she gives him up.

KRISTEN STEINHOFF (NICK'S FRIEND)

He started saying to keep my mouth shut. Then I kind of figured maybe he did have something to do with it, because of the way he was acting.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) The Kia, the car Kristen was driving that night, is looking better and better to the cops as the vehicle used to dispose of Leah's body on this lonely road outside Coquille.

POLICE OFFICER (MALE)

Any idea on a rush case? I mean, what type of timeframe are we talking to get DNA?

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) But investigators have to wait three full weeks for the crime lab to finish its testing and confirm their theory scientific scientifically. Anticipation is high as the call from the lab comes in. On the other side of the line is Oregon state police DNA analyst, Susan Hormann.

SUSAN HORMANN (DNA SUPERVISOR AT OREGON STATE POLICE FORENSIC LABORATORY)

The samples I received was a cutting from the driver's seat cover, a swab from the driver's side rear floorboards, the rear passenger side floorboard, and then the front driver's side floorboard.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) But despite the meticulous testing, the new DNA is a major disappointment, no match.

MARK DANNELS (CHIEF OF COQUILLE POLICE DEPARTMENT)

...the fact, hey, this is going to be Leah's blood and of course it wasn't. So, it was an emotional letdown.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) How will police recover?

MARK DANNELS (CHIEF OF COQUILLE POLICE DEPARTMENT)

Is this case viable to take to prosecution, or is it - the case is just one of those unsolvable?

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) Is there enough evidence to make an arrest? And why would an 18-year-old boy kill his devoted girlfriend? The police talk motive when we return.

COMMERCIAL BREAK

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

COLD CASE; WHAT HAPPENED TO OREGON TEEN?

A decade has passed since little Leah Freeman played freely on the streets of Coquille, Oregon. Every summer, her friends and family hold candles in the night, so no one forgets and police keep looking for her killer.

MARK DANNELS (CHIEF OF COQUILLE POLICE DEPARTMENT)

Hopefully next year's vigil, we'll have a lot of answers to you.

CORY COURTRIGHT (LEAH'S MOTHER)

It's been a long time. It's good to actually see some movement in the case finally.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) As her mother Cory looks around at Leah's friends 10 years after, she can't help thinking where Leah would be in her life's journey if someone had not cut it so short.

CORY COURTRIGHT (LEAH'S MOTHER)

I look at them and just wonder, what would she be? What would she be today? Would she have babies, too? She didn't get to grow up.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) Those answers may never come, but police urged on by the Vidocq Society now believe that even without DNA or an eyewitness, they can prove Nick lied about his whereabouts the night Leah disappeared and that he is the only person with motive and opportunity to have kept her from growing up. Nick's friend, Kristen Steinhoff, is told she's going to be a grand jury witness.

SUMMONS SERVER (MALE)

Nothing but fun, huh?

KRISTEN STEINHOFF (NICK'S FRIEND)

Right, thanks.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) She and more than 100 witnesses convince the grand jury, which had been meeting secretly for a month, that there's enough evidence to indict.

MARK DANNELS (CHIEF OF COQUILLE POLICE DEPARTMENT)

The way it's looking, the indictment is gonna go after Nick McGuffin for the homicide of Leah Freeman.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) Chief Mark Dannels calls his men together, planning the arrest of Nick McGuffin.

MARK DANNELS (CHIEF OF COQUILLE POLICE DEPARTMENT)

The indictment alleges Mr. McGuffin intentionally caused her death.

COLD CASE; WHAT HAPPENED TO OREGON TEEN?

POLICE OFFICER (MALE)

Step back.

POLICE OFFICER (MALE)

Separate your feet. Separate your feet.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) Leah's boyfriend Nick, who knows he's been under suspicion since the weeks after her murder, arrested outside his nearby home.

POLICE OFFICER (MALE)

What do you think this is all about?

NICK MCGUFFIN (SUSPECT)

Obviously they said it's for the murder of Leah Freeman.

POLICE OFFICER (MALE)

Did you do it?

NICK MCGUFFIN (SUSPECT)

No, I didn't do it. Love of my life, man.

POLICE OFFICER (MALE)

Why do they think you did it?

NICK MCGUFFIN (SUSPECT)

Because they have nothing else to go on and I'm the boyfriend.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) And how important has this been to you?

MARK DANNELS (CHIEF OF COQUILLE POLICE DEPARTMENT)

We've done our part. And if this case ever could be solved, I think this is the best time we could have done it. There's no medal you can put on anybody's chest or there's no certificate you can hang on your wall that would mean more than solving this case.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) Nick is indicted with no physical evidence against him.

MARK DANNELS (CHIEF OF COQUILLE POLICE DEPARTMENT)

COLD CASE; WHAT HAPPENED TO OREGON TEEN?

We'd like to have more, like to have a video and a confession. But we have a circumstantial case that we're confident and excited about that we can put out there, we can discredit the boyfriend, we can discount his time line. Why is he lying to us? Because he's responsible for Leah's death.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) Why would Nick kill Leah? The police theory goes back to a mother's fear.

CORY COURTRIGHT (LEAH'S MOTHER)

I told her that if she was gonna continue to see him, that she was gonna get on birth control pills.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) At 15, Leah told friends she was late and feared pregnancy, and police say Nick, a legal adult, feared the consequences.

POLICE OFFICER (MALE)

She was 15, he was 18. And if she was pregnant, then he could get in trouble for statutory rape.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) Nick McGuffin and his family have hired one of the best attorneys in the state and deny Nick had anything to do with Leah's murder.

LAWYER (FEMALE)

He's prepared to enter a plea of not guilty.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) They claim violent drug dealers are to blame and put together their own files of names for the police department to investigate. At his indictment, Nick contest the \$2 million bond holding him in jail until trial.

NICK MCGUFFIN (SUSPECT)

I'm not a flight risk. And I'm a family man and I work hard.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) Soon, the day Leah's friends and family have been waiting for will be here. A day in court.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) How much would it help you if there is some answers, some justice?

CHERIE MITCHELL (LEAH'S BEST FRIEND)

I know that it's really gonna help her family to have that justice, but I just wanted her back. I think that the person that, you know, that did it, they totally deserve to go down. You know, they deserve to spend the

COLD CASE; WHAT HAPPENED TO OREGON TEEN?

rest of their life in jail, remembering what they did every day, you know, because there are people like us that have to remember what they did every day.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) These past 10 years have been particularly difficult on Cherie. Her last day with Leah ended in an argument between best friends.

CHERIE MITCHELL (LEAH'S BEST FRIEND)

I have a lot of guilt on my own part for just the last conversation that we had, and the way I judged her and just the fact that we had a fight and Leah went storming off, you know, and then obviously didn't come back.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) That's quite a burden for you to take on, an unnecessary burden.

CHERIE MITCHELL (LEAH'S BEST FRIEND)

I know. But usually, you get a chance to say you're sorry.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) Must have been rough.

CORY COURTRIGHT (LEAH'S MOTHER)

It is. I don't know that there will ever really be closure.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) Kind of a silly word, right?

CORY COURTRIGHT (LEAH'S MOTHER)

Almost. But I just can't stand the thought of somebody getting away with taking such a beautiful young life. It's just wrong. Whoever did this needs to, needs to pay. We love you, Leah.

COMMERCIAL BREAK

CHRIS CUOMO (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) You can read about other cases solved with the help of the Vidocq Society in the new book, "The Murder Room." We put an excerpt for you on our webpage. That is our show for tonight. Thank you for watching. I'm Chris Cuomo.

ELIZABETH VARGAS (ABC NEWS)

And I'm Elizabeth Vargas. For all of us at "20/20" and ABC News, we're in touch, so you be in touch all the time online at abcnews.com. You can also contact Chris on Twitter and connect with either one of us on Facebook. Have a great weekend.

COLD CASE; WHAT HAPPENED TO OREGON TEEN?

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